

1-1-2010

## Time to focus on Followers: Looking at the other side of the Leadership 'coin'

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### Recommended Citation

Ekundayo, John (2010) "Time to focus on Followers: Looking at the other side of the Leadership 'coin'," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 4, Article 78.

DOI: 10.58809/GWIG9219

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss4/78>

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## 1.0 Introduction

The leadership literature is replete with who a leader is, what leaders do, models or styles of leadership, leadership development, leadership succession, great heroic acts of leaders, etc with little said or written about the followers who constitute the enigmatic majority in many organizations today (Adair, 2006). However, it is the view of some scholars that leadership is a dynamic interplay of influential relationships between leaders and followers situationally involved in a process with an anticipation of mutual outcomes (Pierce & Newstrom, 2008 and Hughes, R. L., et al., 2008). It is in this light that one can say without mincing words that leadership can not occur unless there is followership- the other side of the coin. Simply and squarely put, in a situation, there is a leader where there is (are) follower(s).

Leadership is comparable to any coin having two sides-head or tail. The “*leadership coin*” can be said to be having the *leader* on the frontal side (head) while the backside (tail) can be ascribed to the *follower*, the latter being relegated to the background even as it is located on the backside of the “leadership coin.” It is like a coin whose frontal inscription is that of a Queen and the other ‘inconsequential’ side depicts miners working in harsh conditions. It is a reality that many will take cursory look at the face carrying the Queen’s inscription while few will bother about the other side of the coin having the poor miners’ inscription. Yet, the latter, who bear the brunt of the heat of the day to produce the nation’s wealth, are at the other side of the coin.

There are many monographs, articles, seminars, conferences, workshops, lectures on leaders and leadership; what they do and do not do, with little or no reference to the collaborators, *the followers*, in the leadership process. Collinson (2006, p. 179) stated that there are many followers in the world than leaders, arguing that many leaders in organizations are even, to some degree, followers. Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001 and Hughes, R. L., et al. (2008) corroborated this argument of Collinson arguing that followers are integral part of the leadership process. Rodger Adair buttressed this assertion when he stated that organizations are spending about 80% of their time and resources in leadership studies, research and consultancies while only a paltry 20% is reserved for followers who make up about 80% of the workforce. He referred to the followers as the “enigmatic majority” in today’s organizations (p. 143). One can read and ponder on this brief, but self-explanatory poetry:

*Young Alexander conquered India,*

*He alone?*

*Caesar beat the Gauls.*

*Was there not even a cook in his army?*

*Philip of Spain wept as his fleet*

*Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?*

-Bertolt Brecht (in Kellerman, 2008, p. xi)

Bertolt Brecht, as quoted by Kellerman (2008), was clearly in a caricature manner depicting the leader-centric posture of leadership theory and practice as if only leaders are the players and participants while totally manifesting undignified silence regarding followers who are indeed the critical mass in organizations globally. It is thus the stand and stake of this write-up that there is no leader without a follower, as there is no husband without a wife in the phenomenon called marriage. Consequently, having established the presence and importance of followers as active participants and players in the leadership theory and practice, it could be eye opening to look at followership, followers' typologies and followers' perceptions as there more cases of followers initiating change in organizations globally in organizations and the polity (Kelly, 1992, Chaleff, 1995 and Kellerman, 2008).

## **2.0 Shedding Light on Followership**

Understanding Followership is like grappling the underline meaning of marriage. For instance, to understand marriage, one can not just focus on the wife or husband, but instead, one needs to study the wife, husband, their relationship, and the context within which it is embedded (Pierce & Newstrom, 2008, p. 6). Since the claim has been made in this paper that in the present day organizational set-up, leadership is neither residing in a person or in a position but rather a process of a relationship involving participants who are leaders (superiors), and followers (subordinates), it is worthwhile to take a cursory look at the other side of the 'leadership coin' referred to as followership here in this write-up.

These three authors, Robert Kelley (1992), Ira Chaleff (1995), and Kellerman (2008) have written extensively on followership coming out with typologies or models of followers present in organizations. Robert Kelly's "The Power of Followership" and Ira Chaleff's "The Courageous Follower" were both written to encourage and empower followers in the workplace, be it private or public organizations, and in essence stand up for good leadership and denounce bad leadership. In same vein, Barbara Kellerman, of Harvard University, in her recent book titled: *"FOLLOWERSHIP: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders,"* made a departure from the leadercentric approach of many scholars and researchers in the field of leadership to advocate that more attention be paid to followers, and followership studies, though not to be wholly separated from leadership, but to be more focussed on and studied as an arm of leadership (Kellerman, 2008, p. xix). Kellerman was also of the school of thought that followers are not just appendages of leaders but co-participants in the journey and must be so treated by the leaders declaring that the failure to do this may have negative tendencies both for the leaders, the leadership and the organization. She cited some cases such as Merck, USA, and the Voice of The Faithful, Catholic Church of USA, where followers ignited change to the chagrin of leaders. In the nation of Ukraine also, there was the "Orange Revolution" that was orchestrated and organized by the common people (followers) in Ukraine to peacefully and passionately depose an unpopular government (Kellerman, 2008, pp. 42-44). Indeed, these days, more ordinary people, with no office(s) bestowing authority on them, are causing raves and ripples in organizations and even in governments. It has been noted that when the activities of these active followers are tactfully and collaboratively coordinated, they can ignite and/or activate significant changes that can not be sidelined or ignored in organizations and polity (Kellerman, 2008). Reading through her works on followership, Kellerman stated in stark reality of life:

"We are followers, followers are us. This does not, of course, mean that all of us follow all of the time-sometimes we lead. But all of us follow some of the time. It is the human condition." (Kellerman, B., 2008, p. 93)

This statement of Kellerman is true to a large extent. There are situations or circumstances that warrant some to lead and in another situation the same set of people are following. For instance, a man who is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an organization and at the same time a member of a church congregation. In his organization where he works, he is a leader, whereas in the church he is a follower. There is no way the term followers will become irrelevant or outmoded as advocated by Rost (2006). In fact, more scholars are now appreciating the effect of followership in organizational set-up departing from the leader-centric posture of the literature of the past. Among these authors, researchers and practitioners are Robert Kelly, Ira Chaleff, Barbara Kellerman and of recent, Rodger Adair.

Adair (2008) was so fascinated by the definition of leadership by Rost (1993). The latter stated that "leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purposes." According to Rodger Adair, Joseph Rost provided the best definition of leadership which helps to explain the process of interplay or dynamics of the process involving the participants or players-leaders and followers. This leads, Adair, to a parallel definition that is applicable to followership: "A follower shares in an influence relationship among leaders and other followers with the intent to support leaders who reflect their mutual purposes." Nevertheless, the definition is suspect in two aspects. One, does it mean a member of an organization, group, team or unit who does not support the leader is not a follower within that set-up? Second, does it mean at all times, that leaders and all followers focus on the same purpose in a team, unit, department or organization? These are issues to be addressed in-depth study on followership.

### **3.0 Argument against Followership studies**

However, Rost, in his latest work, stated that he did not support the use of the term followership as it is misleading in a world where many want to lead and not just follow. Rost (2006) even went as far as discouraging scholars from using the term, followership; he was rather advocating for what he tagged: collaborative leadership. Rost's opinion is that leaders and followers cannot be separated (Rodger Adair, 2008) thus agreeing with Kellerman (2008). However, Rodger Adair disagreed with all of the two popular researchers and authority in the field in a well argued proposition. He was of the opinion that followership is not part of leadership, rather, he surmised that leadership is part of followership in that "all people begin with the foundation as a follower and build from there....each person still maintains that status of follower; as long as this foundation holds, the ability to lead will flourish" (Rodger Adair, 2008, p. 138). It can be said that are all followers as all begin their journey from their mothers' wombs as new born babes. They are consequently led and/or nurtured by their mothers, fathers, nannies, baby-sitters, and house-maids; and teachers, tutors, principals, supervisors, coaches/mentors, instructors, lecturers, etc take over from there as they grow up through the kindergartens, nurseries, schools, training institutions, workplaces, colleges, universities, etc.

It is to be noted that in the American culture, the word 'follower' is disliked by many (Kellerman, 2008). Hence, since the word 'follower' is considered an insult, certainly in the USA, it has been shunned by some scholars in the leadership field. For instance, leadership expert, John Gardner, so disdain the word 'follower' that he chose simply not to use it. He argued that: "the connotations of the word 'follower'

suggest too much passivity and dependence to make it fit a term for those who are at the other end of the dialogue with leaders. For this reason, I shall make frequent use of the word ‘constituent’” (Gardner, 1986, pp. 5-6). The society favours men and women to be in leadership positions as there are more benefits, motivation and rewards than simply following. Even, in the family set-up, early in life parents want their wards to quickly get to the top. Virtually no parent will want his child to follow especially for most part of his or her life.

Michael Useem of the Wharton School even wrote a book to assert this prevalent notion, which was titled “Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss So You Both Win.” Even though the book is addressed to those in followership in organizations, it was rather more on leading than having more employees who are good, exemplary, courageous and star followers (Useem, 2001). The book rather than championing the course of followership in organization is awakening the consciousness of the workforce to ‘lead’ their superiors rather than complementarily engaging them in a synergy in the organizational leadership process in the workplace. However, since the society desires and sees ‘leading’ of any kind as better than ‘following’ of any kind, Useem made his case by embracing the former and rejecting the latter. In a similar vein, another author, Matusak was of the opinion that ‘you don’t need an elevated position or a title of great importance to assume a leadership role’ (Matusak, 1997, p. 1).

Joseph Rost, celebrated author of ‘Leadership For the Twenty-First Century’ insisted that although others might find it condescending, he had no problem with the use of the word ‘followers’ though he did not justify it but it was rather explained away. However, Rost did dissociate himself from the old idea that followers were “passive” asserting that leaders were directive and active while followers are generally ‘submissive and passive’. Now, it was Rost view that things are different as leaders are no more equated with being superior, followers also should not be equated with being just acting as subordinates (Rost, 1991, pp. 107-112).

It was alleged by Blackshear (2003) that some students of leadership have also distanced themselves from the use of the word “followers”, on the presumption that to be a follower is to be somehow diminished. In addition, some students of leadership have attributed the use of the word ‘follower’ as somehow un-dignifying and they have found solace in the use of such euphemisms as constituent, associate, member, and subordinate (Blackshear, 2003 and Kellerman, 2008). Adair (2008) went on further to state that much as he agreed with Rost that followership and leadership are intertwined and interrelated, that many researchers (Kellerman, 2009), Rost, (2006), Kelley, (1992) and Chaleff, (2003), view both as a coin having two sides, he stated that scholars and practitioners have “stared so long and hard at the leadership side that most have no idea of what sits on the other side of the coin” (p. 139).

It is worth mentioning at this juncture that followership has come a long way especially as more of followers around the world are creating ripples by initiating change(s) in organizations and politics especially when they synergize by coming together in groups to fight a common cause such as what was witnessed in the World Bank in the recent past when the employees unanimously pull the rug off the feet of Paul Wolfowitz, the erstwhile World Bank President, because he acted unethically (Kellerman, 2008).

Recent activities of followers in the organizations and polity are contemporarily creating waves and thus

alluding to the fact that followers are becoming more important than ever before and cannot be pushed aside in the scheme of things. The import of this is that leaders, especially at the helm of affairs, nearly everywhere are now more vulnerable to forces beyond their control, and they need to watch their backs and ask some pertinent questions such as: what type of followers are dominant in this organization? How do they team or group up? What can the top leaders do to influence the ratio of the dominant group that may give them headache? In the light of this development, it is good to point out that there are instances of leaders who learned not to toy with the power of followership as their negligence was heavily paid for by losing their seats as heads of their organizations and/or nation. The list grows by the day including but not limited to Michael Eisner (former CEO of Disney), Leonid Kuchma (former President of Ukraine), Paul Wolfowitz (former President of World Bank), George Bush (erstwhile United States of America, President), etc. These leaders can testify that the days of sitting at ease for leaders demanding command and control and expecting compliance may be gone for good as many followers globally are getting bolder and more strategic whether in the dynamics of organizations or politics of nations, states, local councils or communities. Kellerman in deferring to this line of thought declares thus in her book:

“They are less likely now than they were in the past to “know their place”, to do as they are told, and to keep their opinions to themselves. This change, this small but seismic shift in the balance of power between leaders and followers, constitutes a caution: leaders who ignore or dismiss their followers do so at their peril” (Kellerman, 2008, p. xxi)

#### **2.4.3 Definitions and descriptions: Followers and Followership**

One can get a picture of who a follower is in the leadership process from the preceding section of this paper. However, since followership is an emerging field of study, there are only few authors and scholars describing followers and followership in comparison with those writing about leaders and leadership. For the purpose of this write-up, the following definitions will be considered:

“Followers can be defined by their rank; they are subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors.” (Kellerman, 2008, p. xix)

“Followers can be defined by their behaviour: they go along with what someone else wants and intends.” (Kellerman, 2008, p. xix)

In essence, Kellerman defined followers both by rank and behaviour. However, there are occasions where rank does not imply that one is a follower; it may depend on how much influence and power an individual possesses within a group or an organization. Kellerman, from these two definitions of followers, gave one of the best definitions of followership as follows:

“Followership implies a relationship (rank), between subordinates and superiors, and a response (behaviour), of the former to the latter.” (Kellerman, 2008, p. xx)

This is in effect stating that followers are not compulsorily subjected to doing the leaders’ bidding as they are free to relate and respond appropriately in a process. Hence, it is no more a unidirectional or one-way top-down approach dictated and directed by the leaders. The consequence of this for private organizations and public corporations is that leaders should better pay more attention to followers’ perceptions, followership identities, followers’ training and indoctrination as means of obtaining and

sustaining better organizational performance. This is in tandem with the opinions of some scholars who advocate for more employees who are “exemplary”, “courageous”, “stars”, “good”, “disciple” as a prerequisite for organizational success (Chaleff, 2003; Kelly, 1992, 2004; Kellerman, 2008; Adair, 2008; Lundin & Lancaster, 1990; Potter, Rosenbach, & Pittman, 2001; Raelin, 2003; Rosenau, 2004, Seteroff, 2003). Virtually, all these authors and practitioners agree that, in organizations today, employees (followers) are no more the stereotypically docile, passive, timid, sheep but in fact contemporary employees are emerging as people who are interconnected and “empowered, knowledge workers” possessing the skills associated with “distributed” and “shared leadership” (Collinson, 2006, p. 179). Collinson affirmed that in the workplace today, “good followership” skills are vital to success and sustenance and not just acquisition of more leadership skills. Kellerman was the first proponent of good followership (Kellerman, 2008).

Kellerman (2008) was of the view that things are changing now in comparison to the last two decades when leadership was a big business and few scholars wanted to have any romance with followers. Many scholars are now increasingly aware that followership, under whatever guise, is an integral part of leadership theory and practice. However, there is something good about Rost as we should not throw out the baby with the bath water. It is interesting that Rost (1993) paid much attention to interplay of leaders and followers whose coming together in the leadership process is because they have mutual intention to initiate a change leading to a positive outcome. Rost tagged this collaborative leadership where the followers are seen as co-leaders in the leadership process. Even though it was to Rost’s credit, this identification came about, the scholars aforementioned have done a lot of work on followership advocating for “exemplary followers” (Kelly, 1992), “courageous followers” (Chaleff, 2003) and “good followers” (Kellerman). It is noteworthy that a strong voice, even though young and vibrant, Adair (2008, p. 139), came up with a 4-D typology of followership styles preferring the “disciple follower” as the best in performance as well as exhibiting low turn over-they endure with organizations.

### **3.0 Identifying Followers’ Typologies**

There are various kinds or classes of followers in organizations’ today. This write-up will briefly consider typologies as contemplated by scholars of followership. There are four of such scholars with various yardsticks to classify followers’ identities.

#### **3.1 Robert Kelly’s Typology**

Robert Kelly did a fantastic work on followership, and in his book identified five classes or types of followers in organizations as follow (Kelly, 1992 & 1999):

1. Alienated Followers: Think freely and critically; but they do not participate in the groups and organizations of which they are members. They score high in independent thinking and low in active engagement.
2. Exemplary Followers: Perform well in every aspect. They usually exercise independent, critical thinking, separate from the leaders or the group, and they also are actively engaged. They scored high across the board.
3. Conformist Followers: are content to take orders or defer to their leaders. They score high in active engagement and low in independent thinking.

4. **Passive Followers:** Let their leaders do the thinking for them, which means they require constant supervision. They score low in independent thinking and in level of engagement.
5. **Pragmatist Followers:** “hug the middle of the road.” They question their leader’s decisions, but not too critically. They score “middling” in independent thinking and “middling” in terms of engagement.

Robert Kelly’s crusade, according to Barbara Kellerman, was to turn followers in the workplace to “exemplary” followers (Kellerman, p. 82). His opinion was that the “exemplary or effective worker” (he refers to the term interchangeably) is both enthusiastic and intelligent whose focus is to contribute to the realization of the organization’s goal. Hence, they are needed in organizations as they are courageous, honest and credible. Kelly’s was more concerned on level of participation and independent thinking as followers in his design of his typology.

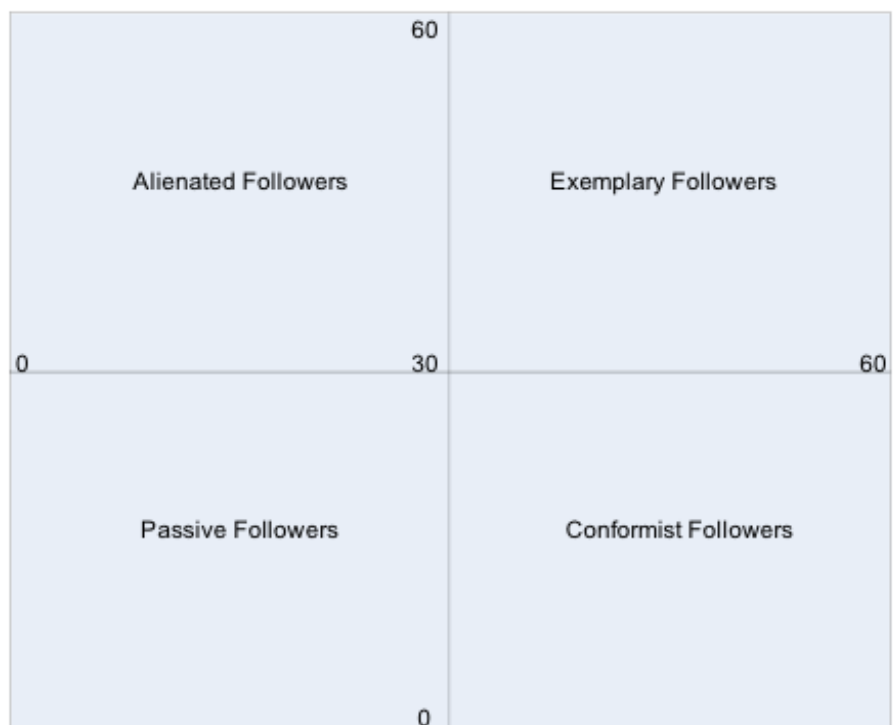
Kelly’s conclusion according to Kellerman (2008, pp. 235-236) is that followers matters, not only leaders. Kelly’s secondary argument is that followers can matter more if they are “exemplary”, if they are actively engaged, while at the same time maintaining their independence, both from the leader and the rest of the group.

### Figure 1: Robert Kelly’s Typology

#### 3.2 Ira Chaleff’s Typology

Chaleff’s typology was based more on level of participation and also to let followers know that they can courageously stand up for their leaders, if they are good, and at the same time, they can courageously stand up to bad leaders to critically challenge them. These are the four classes he postulated:

1. **Implementer:** These followers are the most common in workplace especially in large organizations where superiors want subordinates to get the work done.
2. **Partner:** these followers fully support their leaders; but they are also ready and willing to challenge, if necessary.
3. **Individualist:** these followers tell their leaders and, for that matter, everyone else just what they think and how they feel. But because they regularly withhold their support from people in position of authority, they are marginalised.





4. Resource: these followers “do an honest day’s work for a few days’ pay” but they do not go beyond that minimum expected of them.

### Figure 2: Ira Chaleff’s Typology

However, in a good leadership set-up, Ira Chaleff does not sound revolutionary as he wants followers to support their leaders and to “contribute to leadership development.” One may ask: does it not sound antithetical to challenge the “good” leaders when the need arises? It may be of interest to find out the determinants of good leadership in this case as what is a poison to someone may be food to another fellow; or how can one justify the cases of the ardent or ‘diehard’ followers of Osama Bin



Laden (of the infamous Al-Qaeda organization responsible for many terrorist attacks globally), the late President Saddam Hussein of Iraq (his unrepentant involvement in promotion of terrorism) or President Idi Amin (his dictatorial and tyrannical regime in Uganda, East Africa)? Shall one call some followers of these leaders ‘exemplary’, ‘good’, ‘star’, ‘effective’ followers?

### 3.3 Barbara Kellerman’s Typology

Kellerman (2008, pp. 85-92) settled for “a single, simple metric” in depicting her typology of followers in organizations classifying them into five types based on level of engagement. They are:

1. Isolate: These followers are completely detached from the process. They do not care about their leaders, or know anything about them, or respond to them in any way. By default, in knowing nothing and doing nothing, they empower their leaders to have their way whether for good or bad. It is like an eligible voter who neither cares to register nor participate in an election. In the workplace, isolates are “uninformed, uninterested, and unmotivated” (Kellerman, 2008, p. 91).
2. Bystanders: They observe but do not participate in the process of leadership thereby making a deliberate decision to stand aside. They disengage from their leaders as well as the group. This withdrawal is a tacit support for whomever and whatever constitutes the status quo.
3. Participants: These followers are in some way engaged; clearly favour their leaders and their group. They may be clearly opposed as well to either of the two. There is no mid-way or mistake about who or what they stand for. In essence, they can be said to put their money where their mouths are.
4. Activists: These followers feel strongly for or against their leaders or group. They can work hard

for their leaders or even undermine them going to extent of pulling the rug off their feet.

5. **Diehards:** these are prepared to die for what they stand for or belief; whether an individual, idea, or both. Diehards can be deeply devoted to their leaders or their ideas. View in another dimension, they are ready to remove these leaders by any means necessary, if they do not meet their aspirations or expectations. They are ready to risk 'life and limb' to project their cause to a logical conclusion.

### 3.4 Rodger Adair's 4-D Followers' Model

This is a representation of how employees view themselves within the workforce. The assumption for this model or type of followers is that these employees or followers are single-minded who do not share minds with other groups that Adair depicted by quadrants. This we know is not true in real workplace environment where some can belong to informal groups, form alliance, networks, etc. Rodger Adair (2008, pp. 144-145).

There are four distinct employee characteristics as depicted below:

1. **Disgruntled:** Employees typically have been slighted (whether from an actual or perceived event). Hence, it is their conclusion that the organization is of little value to them and they are of little value to it as well.
2. **Disengaged:** Employees see the value of keeping their present jobs and will not mind doing the minimum to make sure they are within the workforce while not buying into the organization's mission or purpose.
3. **Doer:** Employees feel motivated and therefore excited to participate in collaborating with others for maximum productivity. They are however not stable as their are wont to look for "greener grass" outside the organization necessitating a high turn-over for this category of employees.
4. **Disciple:** Employees feel engaged; and they exhibit high productivity and intend staying with the organization for a long time. They believe that they are in the "right position at the right time."

### 4.0 Implications and Conclusion

With the way many followers in organizations and polities are recognizing that in coming together as teams or groups with common vision and value, they can initiate changes, then top leaders in organizations and in the polities need to know that their power bases of old is already being eroded presently and hence there is the need in organizations for the top leaders especially the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), to know the typologies of followers in their organizations, their groupings, traits, motivations, etc. It has been discovered that if they fail to pay attention to their followers, the latter may group up against their corporate vision, if it is not in tandem with their own agenda, to pull initiate a change they desire or pull the rug off the feet of the CEO without much ado.

Moreover, Adair, 2008 (p. 138), is of the view that followership behaviour puts in motion within organizations tactical success, whereas "leadership talents and skills propel the engine for strategic accomplishments in organizations." In the light of this, organizations leaders need to pay more attention to followership development and training in today's organization to maximize outcomes within the organization where followers' population makes up invariably 80% of the workforce. It was the

conclusion of Adair (p. 153): "There is so much interplay and crossover between leadership and followership that the two can not be studied completely independent of each other." Hence, the need to devote time to more research studies in followership concentrating on its impact, occurrence, motivations, typologies, synergies, etc in organizations as well as in polities globally. There must be a systematic shift from concentrating on leadership skills training schemes to followership training schemes. The two actually must be conducted in today's organizations.

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